

Mediating Role of Death Anxiety between Supernatural Beliefs and Life Satisfaction among Muslim Adults

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Keywords: <i>Supernatural Beliefs, Death Anxiety, Satisfaction with Life</i>	ABSTRACT <i>The belief in supernatural forces is so pervasive in Pakistani society that it is nearly universal among illiterate and semi-literate people. Few literate individuals also subscribe to the idea of supernatural beings and entities. Such beliefs may invoke anxieties resulting in reduced satisfaction with life. In the current study, a cross-sectional survey of Muslim people was used to examine the potential mediation effect of death anxiety between supernatural beliefs and life satisfaction. A purposive sample (N = 220; with equal representation of both genders) of adults was recruited from different areas of district Sargodha. The supernatural Belief Scale, Arabic Scale of Death Anxiety, and Satisfaction with Life Scale were employed for assessing supernatural belief, death anxiety, and life satisfaction, respectively. Path analysis in Amos revealed the positive direct effect of supernatural belief on death anxiety and the negative direct effect of death anxiety on life satisfaction. Supernatural beliefs also demonstrated a negative indirect effect on life satisfaction through death anxiety. Overall, we found that individuals with supernatural beliefs were more likely to feel death anxiety, which might make them less satisfied with their life. Clinicians and mental health practitioners must envisage such therapeutic strategies as could counter the supernatural beliefs of the clients so that they might enjoy a more fulfilling and satisfying life.</i>
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1 Introduction

Since ancient times, humanity has marveled at the wonders of the world. However, concurrently, individuals have been plagued by contemplations of death and the notion of leaving everything behind. Within diverse religious and sectarian groups, various supernatural beliefs (SNBs) emerge, postulating the existence of supernatural entities such as gods, ancestral spirits, elves, and gnomes. Cognitive theorists contend that religious concepts are formulated on the foundation of SNBs (Jong et al., 2013). Religion encompasses three dimensions: cognitive (beliefs), emotional (belonging and identity), and behavioral (actions and social groups). SNB represents the cognitive dimension of religiosity (Bluemke et al., 2016).

Despite scientific advancements and an enhanced understanding of the physical world, reports of supernatural experiences persist. A survey conducted in the United States indicated that 68 percent of Americans believe in supernatural beings (Baker & Bader, 2014). SNBs possess intricate and powerful connections with death anxiety or the fear of death.

Chaggaris and Lester (1989) suggest that death anxiety (DA) is not associated with a belief in a higher power or an afterlife, but rather with the fear of eternal damnation. Additionally, another study found a significant positive correlation between DA and SNBs, highlighting a strong relationship between belief in an alternate world and fear of transitioning into it burdened by sins Maltby and Day (2000). Individuals who harbor stronger SNBs tend to experience heightened anxiety about death due to concerns about judgment based on their life choices (Campbell, 2003).

Prior research has primarily focused on examining the relationship between religiosity and death anxiety (DA) through the lens of religious orientation. Findings from this study conducted with older adults (N = 400) emphasize the importance of religious orientation and the underlying cause of alienation from religion. Internal religious orientation, driven by personal well-being and peace of mind, is associated with higher life satisfaction and lower levels of DA. Conversely, external factors leading to alienation from religion result in heightened negative experiences, fears of death, and compromised psychological health and quality of life (Dehkordi et al., 2012). Additionally, research involving hemodialysis patients has identified a connection between DA and spiritual experiences, suggesting that individuals with high levels of spirituality tend to have less fear of death and vice versa (Mahboub et al., 2014).

Consistency between belief and behavior emerges as a crucial factor in alleviating negative beliefs and fears of death. Individuals who firmly believe in life after death but demonstrate low engagement in religious practices are more prone to experience DA (Wink & Scott, 2005). Furthermore, a study by Wen (2012) provides evidence of a positive link between extrinsic religiosity and DA, underscoring the significance of religious orientation.

Life satisfaction (LS) serves as a comprehensive measure of well-being, encompassing an individual's sentiments and perspectives on their life. It consists of three primary facets: positive affect, negative affect, and LS itself, all contributing to overall well-being (Diener, 2009).

A comprehensive review of the association between religious or SNBs and LS is formed based on the research conducted in the last decade. The author of the aforementioned review examined over a hundred studies to find the statistical relationship between supernatural or religious beliefs and LS. According to a final sketch of their relationship, 79 researchers found a positive connection between SNBs and LS, 13 studies discovered no link and only one study found a negative relationship (Abdel-Khalek, 2004).

Considering the associations between SNBs, DA, and LS, it is pertinent to explore the potential mediating effect of DA between SNBs and LS because it improves our understanding of the psychological processes underpinning these ideas. In the light of aforementioned literature, the present study hypothesized:

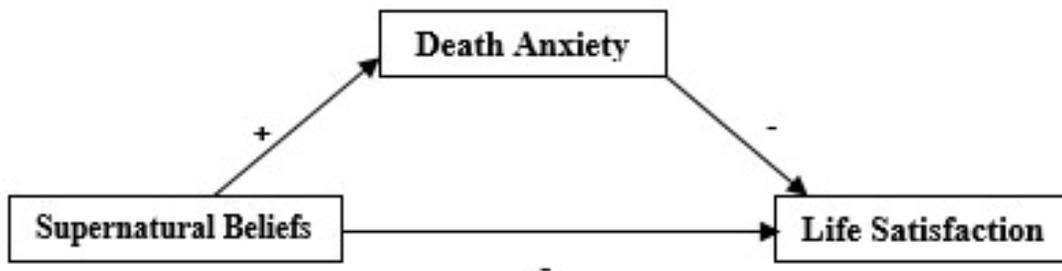
Hypothesis 1: Supernatural beliefs will be a significant positive predictor of death anxiety and a negative predictor of life satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: Death anxiety will be the significant negative predictor of life satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3: Death anxiety will mediate the relationship between supernatural beliefs and life satisfaction.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Present Study



2 Method

This study was completed by using a cross-sectional research design. It was conducted in Sargodha City from May 2021 to December 2021.

2.1 Sample

A purposive sample of 220 Muslim adults ($N = 220$) was selected from various areas of Sargodha, with ages ranging from 25 to 48 years ($M = 32.84, SD = 2.43$). Under the inclusion criteria, only Muslim adults who possessed at least a matriculation certificate were included in the present study. Individuals below the age of 25 years and those with less than 10 years of formal education were excluded. Additionally, participants with mental disorders and non-Muslim adults were also excluded. The demographic attributes of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographics of the Participants (N = 220)

Demographic Variables	N	%
Gender		
Men	110	50%
Women	110	50%
Education		

Metric	123	55.9%
Intermediate	45	20.5%
Graduation	52	23
Age		
Young Adults (19-35)	120	54.5%
Middle Adults (36-55)	110	45.5%

2.2 Instruments

Urdu-translated self-reported measures were used to measure the focal construct of the study.

2.2.1 *Supernatural Belief Scale (Jong et al., 2013)*

The Urdu version of the Supernatural Belief Scale (Fayyaz, 2019) was utilized to measure participants' supernatural beliefs (SNBs). The scale consists of ten items, employing a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). Previous validation of the scale involved a diverse sample of individuals, including religious, non-religious, and atheist participants. The reported reliability of the scale by the author ranged from .87 to .95.

2.2.2 *Arabic Scale of Death Anxiety (Abdel-Khalek, 2004)*

DA was assessed using the Urdu version of the Arabic Scale of Death Anxiety (Ghayas, 2016), comprising 20 questions with 5-point Likert-type responses ranging from 1 (no) to 5 (very much). The scale was validated using a sample of young and middle-aged individuals, and the author reported a range of reliability from .88 to .93.

2.2.3 *Satisfaction with Life Scale-SWLS (Diener et al., 1985)*

The SWLS scale was utilized to assess global cognitive evaluations of LS. It consists of five items, and participants rated their responses on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The Urdu version of the SWLS, validated by Siddiq (2001), was used in the present study. The scale has a possible score range of 5-35 and has been validated on almost all age groups. The internal consistency of the scale is reported as .87, indicating high reliability, and its 2-month test-retest reliability is .82.

2.3 Procedure

After obtaining formal permission from the authors, an approval letter was obtained from the departmental ethics committee to conduct the study. Participants were directly contacted and provided with a comprehensive overview of the research objectives. Before completing the questionnaires, participants were requested to provide written informed consent. Clear instructions were provided for each scale to ensure participants understood the items and to minimize any potential confusion. Throughout the process, participants received a warm and supportive response, with any queries promptly addressed. It was emphasized to participants that their data would be treated confidentially and solely used for research purposes. The questionnaire took approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete for each participant. Following the data collection, participants were sincerely thanked for their valuable time and participation.

2.3.1 Statistical Analysis

Data from the present study were analyzed through descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations (in SPSS), and path analysis (in Amos).

3 Results

Out of 220 participants, both men ($n = 110$; 50%) and women ($n = 110$; 50%) were given equal representation in the sample. Mediation was assessed by evaluating the indirect effect of DA between SNBs and LS. Results of the Pearson correlation revealed a significant correlation between all variables of the study. Values of the correlation coefficient range from .21 to .56. Subsequently, the mediating role of DA was checked between SNB and LS (see Figure 1).

Table 1 revealed that SNB had a significant positive correlation with DA and a negative correlation with LS. Death anxiety is significantly negatively related to LS.

Table 1
Psychometric Properties and Descriptive Statistics of the Scales (N = 220)

Variables	1	2	3	M	SD	α	Range		Sk
							Potential	Actual	
1. SNB	—	.21**	-.31**	45.64	2.38	.74	25-50	10-50	-1.33
2. DA	—	—	-.56**	70.91	4.24	.97	20-100	20-100	-.18
3. LS	—	—	—	11.00	6.71	.91	5-25	5-25	.59

Note. SNB = supernatural belief; DA = death anxiety; LS = life satisfaction

** $p < .01$

Figure 1 describes the path diagram produced by the Amos software. On each path, single-headed arrows show the values of standardized regression coefficients. The fit indices of the model suggested that the model fitted well to the data ($\chi^2 = 2.51$, $df = 2.00$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .034, $p_{close} = .46$).

Figure 1

Path Diagram of the Present Study

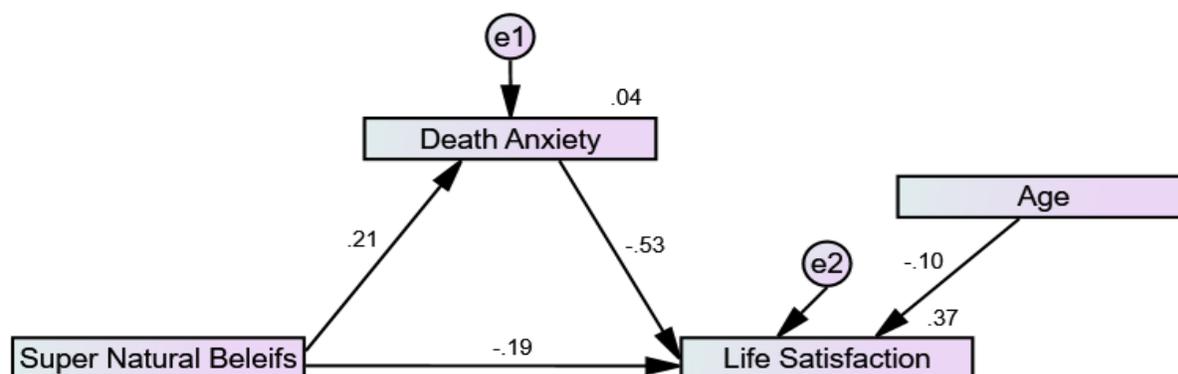


Table 2 depicts the results of the path analysis of the present study showing the direct and indirect effects of SNB and DA on LS. SNB had a positive direct effect on DA and a negative effect on LS. DA had a negative direct effect on LS. DA mediated between SNB and LS.

Table 2
Direct and Indirect Effects of Variables of the Study (N = 220)

Paths	β	95% CI		p
		LL	UL	
SNB→DA	.21	.09	.32	.001
DA → LS	-.53	-.62	-.40	.001
SNB→LS	-.19	-.29	-.08	.001
SNB → DA→ LS	-0.11	.05	.18	.001
Age → LS	-.10	-.007	.21	.066

Note. SNB = supernatural belief; DA = death anxiety; LS = life satisfaction

4 Discussion

According to the results of the current study, there is a substantial negative correlation between SNBs and LS, as well as a significant positive correlation between SNBs and DA. Additionally, a negative correlation is observed between DA and LS, as shown in Table 1. These findings support the first and second hypotheses of the study which are aligned with previous research indicating that individuals who are externally oriented tend to engage in religious activities for the sake of gaining approval from others rather than seeking a deeper understanding of religious teachings, which subsequently leads to a lower level of life satisfaction (Dehkordi et al., 2012). Similarly, negative SNBs and attitudes such as expecting retribution from God on Doom's Day, having an avoidant/insecure connection with God, and displaying external religious motivation are associated with higher levels of DA and lower levels of LS (Rosmarin & Leidl, 2020).

SNB and DA were shown to have a positive association in the cultural setting of Pakistan, whereas SNB and LS were found to have a negative correlation (Rehman & Yousaf, 2018). A high level of SNB combined with an external religious orientation leads to a high level of DA but a poor level of psychological well-being and LS. Conversely, SNB with intrinsic orientation results in a low amount of DA and a high level of PWB and LS. Based on these findings, it can be inferred that the individuals in our study most likely had an extrinsic religious motivation, which would have increased their DA. However, this supposition can only be proven after additional investigation.

Similarly, the finding of the present study, where DA negatively predicts LS, aligns with a study conducted in Pakistan with retirees aged 56-70 years ($N = 111$) (Saeed & Bokhary, 2016). Results of that study revealed a significant inverse relationship between DA and LS, explaining that for living a peaceful and satisfying life, a person must be free from any kind of anxiety, especially death anxiety. Similarly, another study yielded the same result, indicating that fears of death are inversely related to life satisfaction (Roshani, 2012). Death anxiety leads to an unrealistic fear of death, which ultimately decreases a person's interest in life and daily activities, as their focus becomes fixated on thoughts of death and dying. These individuals not only fear death but also fear the process of dying. The consistent negative thought patterns regarding death decrease or sometimes completely remove their concern for the joys of life.

Moreover, the third hypothesis of the study claiming that DA mediates between SNBs and LS is supported by the results (see Table 2). The mediating mechanism of DA between SNB and LS can be explained by the work of Dezutter et al. (2009), suggesting that beliefs regarding God and supernatural powers lead to death-related thinking, ultimately causing DA. Therefore, a high level of DA makes people more focused on negative and death-related thoughts, which ultimately leads to an unfavorable attitude toward life and life dissatisfaction (Azarian et al., 2016). Moreover, it was found that people who experience more DA are less psychologically healthy and allow negative thoughts to occupy their minds. This consistent merging of negative thoughts may result in a low level of life satisfaction (Azarian et al., 2016). Additionally, in the context of Pakistani culture, a negative relationship exists between DA and LS. Thus, when a person negatively evaluates the process of dying, it results in a negative appraisal of life, a low level of psychological health, and a passive and destructive approach toward life, all of which are opposite to life satisfaction. The consistent merging of these negative perceptions may lead to decreased levels of LS (Mueen et al., 2006). A strong body of research supported the same results that DA mediates the relationship between supernatural beliefs and LS in a rather indirect way. Strong supernatural beliefs are associated with higher levels of DA (Maltby & Day, 2000). Similarly, the findings of Campbell (2003) gave the same results describing the connection between SNBs or religious beliefs and DA. Abdel-Khalek (2004) later confirmed that DA impacts a person's LS. These studies collectively highlight the mediating role of DA in the link between supernatural beliefs and LS, which presents empirical evidence for acceptance of the proposed hypothesis.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

The review of previous studies and the findings of the current study highlight the crucial role of religious beliefs and perceptions in shaping an individual's life. Positive and healthy beliefs are associated with a more fulfilling life, while fearful perceptions can significantly impact one's well-being. The present study reveals that SNBs and DA are significant negative predictors of LS among Muslim adults. Individuals with strong SNBs tend to experience higher levels of DA, which in turn leads to lower satisfaction with their lives. Recognizing the mediating effect of DA is essential in understanding its impact on life satisfaction. Therefore, interventions that aim to decrease death anxiety can play a vital role in enhancing LS and promoting overall well-being. These findings have implications for professionals and practitioners in various fields, including psychology, mental health, and religious studies. Understanding the mediating role of DA signals the development of targeted interventions to

address and alleviate death anxiety within religious contexts. By promoting healthier perceptions of death and the afterlife, individuals with strong SNBs may experience increased life satisfaction and overall psychological flourishing. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between religious beliefs, death anxiety, and life satisfaction, with the potential to improve individuals' overall quality of life.

6 Future Research Directions

Relying only on a single method of data collection can deteriorate the findings therefore it is suggested to use mix method approach. A reasonable size of the population residing in the main city of Sargodha hails from rural areas, so one can't separate the impact of lifestyle (or upbringing in environments that shapes a person's religious beliefs) for people who recently shifted to the main city. In future studies, mediating variables in terms of personal and social factors must be considered. For instance, further research should explore religious orientation to get a clear picture of the relationship between variables of the study. Lastly, the study does not touch on the subject of various sects of the Muslim population (since scholars of these sects share slightly differing views on life after death) which could have a potential impact on the relationship between variables of the study. Prospect studies must consider this factor to optimize current findings.

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